

SUBVERTING LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC INNOVATION IN THE PROSE-WORK OF KHUSHWANT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

Khushwant Singh is one of the best -known Indian writers of all times. He is one of the finest historians and novelists and an outstanding observer and social critic. His assessment and comparison of social and behavioral traits of people from India and the West is full of outstanding wit. He is considered as a realist and humanist in one and this picture of him is revealed in his work. His use of language is down-to-earth, realistic and often an exact translation of the Hindi or the Punjabi dialect. His language is a living and vital entity that can be termed as Indian-English or Indianism. In this paper, I intend to show that Khushwant Singh, while trying to indigenize his writings, adopts radical strategies to innovate and manipulate the English languages with which he creates his texts. In his prose work, he employs, in a specific style, linguistic tactics like proverbs, euphemism, metaphor, metonymy translation/transliteration, intra/inter-textuality, and pidginization. Besides this Irony forms one of the basic characteristics in his style. Quite often he presents examples of both verbal and situational irony.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic Innovation, Metonymy, Irony, Pidginization, Proverbs

INTRODUCTION

Modernism perpetrates a two-fold strategy of both assimilating and undermining the norms of communicative language. By norms of communicative language, it refers to language that places a priority on the realistic and practical function of communication, the language in which modernization and bourgeois ideology are grounded. It is the social language involved in the workings of social institutions, perhaps predominantly the family but also the political arena, official administrations, schools, churches, newspapers, and judicial system. Modern fiction adopts this language into its narrative communication, initiating and to an extent validating the principles based in such language, but in a larger effort to challenge the practical functions of this language and subvert its social meanings. It negates the ideologies that are grounded in such language.

For an exhaustive critical evaluation of modernism, especially the postcolonial Indian literature, the basic parameters have to be the linguistic and narrative approaches that shape the central spirit of modernist fiction. The issues of language and form are keys to understanding modernism and its engagement with modernization. The postcolonial era is marked with a crucial change in the use of English language in Indian Writings. Prominent writers of Indian English Fiction like Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Khushwant Singh have used English innovatively, and have demonstrated the extent to which English can be 'Indianised'. Their linguistic experiments comprise the traits of Indianisation and hybridization.

In her well-known critique of Indian English Fiction, *The Twice Born Fiction* (1974), Meenakshi Mukherjee comments, 'the most significant challenge is the task of using the English language in a way that will be distinctively Indian and still remain English'. Khushwant Singh has faced this challenge squarely and churned out an Indian English

that is peculiarly a mixture tasty and spicy. This could be possible for him because of his tendency for amalgamation or, in the words of Salman Rushdie, 'chutnification' of various narrational registers.

The English of Khushwant Singh is distinctly postcolonial and postmodern. It gives us glimpses into his conscious craftsmanship, which aims at linguistic decentralization and hybridization. The very peculiar linguistic deviations and innovations that mark his text are: the sprinkle of English language with Hindi and Urdu words; his abundant use of colloquial speech; frequent word-for-word translation from Hindi into English; his keen observation and vivid description; an extra pinch of dramatic flavor at times and use of various figurative expressions, especially irony at its best.

USE OF IRONY

The stories of Khushwant Singh portray a deep ironical view of the world around him. They show his mild irony and his knack of being ironical on the part of his own countrymen. Irony constitutes one of the essential characteristics in his style. Irony occurs as a result of the interrelation between two meanings emerging out from the same statement or situation, since one state seems to negate the other one and this contrast assumes a striking effect. Irony in Khushwant Singh's is sometimes expressed by a sentence expressing different thing than what is said. It also arises from a discrepancy between the expression and realization. Even sometimes the character and situation as seen are different from what they mean. These types of description in all make the work ironical. Khushwant Singh's work is representative of both verbal and situational irony.

- In one of his stories "The Voice of God" Ganda Singh, a chief of dacoits and thugs, wins an election with his power and his relations with Mr. Forsythe, an English deputy commissioner, defeating Baba Ram Singh, one of his rivals in the election, a devoted worker among poor peasants who call himself a kisan. The last comment in the story shows deep irony and humour, **"The people had spoken. The voice of the people is the Voice of the God"**. Here the disbelief and hypocrisy of the people is shown by the ironical comment.
- Another short story, "Karma," reveals the psychology of an educated Indian in British ruled India and his character is presented in an ironical way. It represents the irony of a learned, arrogant and proudly Indian man, who pretends to be a foreigner. It brings the ironical contrast with the most unexpected defeat of a person who suffers humiliation and misery by those whom he appreciates as his ideals.
- "The Mark of Vishnu", also presents remarkable example of irony. Irony is implied through the title itself. The title is symbolic as "The Mark of Vishnu" means the divine function of preservation of life on Earth. But here the irony, the "Mark of Vishnu is implied as the 'mark of snake bite'. Ganga Ram places a "V" mark on his forehead as a symbol of devotion to Kala Nag. But ultimately the snake bites him on his forehead and leaves a "V" mark of snake bite.

USE OF NATIVE VOCABULARY

Khushwant Singh displays his skill at 'Indianisation' and 'hybridization' at its best when he, at the lexical level, employs some words from Hindi and Urdu dialects. At the foremost glimpse, the most appealing characteristic of his language is the abundant intersperse of English with Hindi, Panjabi and Urdu words throughout his prose-work, and this multihued sprinkling offers an oriental flavor to his work. Some examples of such words are; 'kisan', 'zenana', 'coolie', 'janta', 'kala nag', 'phannyar', 'krait', 'sahib', 'zaildar', 'toba-toba 'lambardar', 'charpoy', 'gharreeb purrwar', 'memsahib' and many more.

He employs this technique perhaps for two precise reasons: firstly, to locate his fiction characters in various cities of India and Pakistan; and secondly, to subvert the English language into a language best suited to express the sensibility of Indian readers. The author uses English to transcribe the experiences of a non-English speaking peasant community.

USE OF INDIAN ENGLISH INTERJECTIONS

Khushwant Singh often uses the Indian words of interjection to provide the reader with a native feel.

- A use of tiny native exclamation for the purpose of obtaining the attention of the recipient or for expressing a powerful emotion. occasionally, the local exclamation is employed to highlight the strong emotion uttered
 - Harey Ram, Harey Ram
 - toba, toba
 - Hai, hai—like someone in pain
 - Wah, wah!
- Use of interjections that evoke God or Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, religious model with a view to urge for help in a difficult situation, vow to the truthfulness of something, convey disappointment when in trouble, or to offer recognition to God for blessing received.
 - God alone knows how many they killed
 - I swear by the Guru I am innocent
 - In the name of God, I swear he did nothing
 - The Guru has been merciful to this village
- Khushwant Singh has quite often used address or summon following an interjection, such as —O! —Oi ! Or —Oye!
 - Please, O King of pearls. I am innocent.
 - Oi Daleep Singha, the river has risen!
 - Oi! Lala!
 - Oye, Budmasha, you will not desist from your budmashi!
 - Lambardara, why don't you tell us something?

CUSTOMARY POLITENESS

In most of his stories, Khushwant Singh has used phrases that offer excessive courtesy to educated or wealthy individuals, religious leaders, and political figures. These consist of

- There are examples of exceptionally lofty names or titles that go beyond simply honoring the addressee. There is a frequent use of Statements that lift the status of the addressee or that demote the significance or status of the speaker in order to lift the status of the addressee.
 - Defender of the poor (gharreeb purrwar)
 - Government

- Emperor
- Possessor of pearls

HIS ITERATIVE WORDPLAY

Khushwant Singh's work displays a very remarkable feature of repetition:

- Reiteration of key word/ words within one declarative clause or across clauses. To give the expression a rhyming, alliterative quality. Just like repetition, however, iterative wordplay emphasizes the speaker's key thought e.g.
 - If you eat, I will eat. If you don't, I will not either.
 - They cannot escape from God. No one can escape from God.
 - What had to happen has happened.
- Reversal of key words in a phrase, a declarative clause or across two declarative clauses. One element of the phrase or the clause is the reverse of the other element in one of the two ways:
 - The literal order of the words in Part B is the reverse of Part A or
 - The meaning of Part B is the opposite of the meaning of Part A
 - Either one word in a declarative clause rhymes with the last word of the clause or the last word in a second declarative clause rhymes with the last word in the first declarative clause.
 - Examples for the same are:
 - Even if I am not married, I do a married man's work.
 - What has happened? Ask me what has not happened!
 - I was not murdering anyone. I was being murdered.

HIS SEMANTIC INDIANIZATION

Another element of Linguistic innovation in Khushwant Singh's writing is the indianization of the semantic elements. He achieves the same through:

- Use of single or compound English words that are unusual in American or British English. It includes single or compound words that might have been directly translated from Indian regional languages. The meaning of the word might be understandable to American or British English speakers just by their comprehending the context of the utterance, but the word itself is unusual in American or British English. For example:
 - We cannot really play this stabbing game.
 - Government, she knows nothing about drink.
 - Pull the punkah for an hour or two till it gets cool.
 - I thought the Sahib was tired and would like his feet pressed.
- Naming people by using their predominant personality trait, individual or family occupation, location, and family relationship.

- Jugga's weaver girl
- I can check up the turn of water with the canal man.

USE OF INNOVATIVE SIMILES

While making a comparison of one thing to another, especially in the context of Indian set-up, Khushwant Singh often uses similes that are comparisons with specific elements in Indian culture and native terminology.

- You snored like a railway engine
- He will run like a jackal when he hears my name
- See how he sleeps like a pig without a care in the world
- He is like a stud bull
- They have behaved like snakes

PHONETIC FEATURE: EYE-DIALECT SPELLINGS

Khushwant Singh's work has a frequent use of eye-dialect encoding of characters' speech—that is, the authors' use of non-standard spellings in novel dialogue to draw attention to the characters' nonstandard variety of English.

- Hullo, Hullo, Hullo
- Hindou - Hindou

USE OF ANGLICIZED NATIVE IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

Khushwant Singh often translates the native idioms word-for-word in English

- This new government is **talking very loudly** of stamping out all this.
- Politically they are the world's biggest **four-twenties**.
- Yes, absolutely, **sixteen annas in the rupee**.
- It is **written on our foreheads** and on the **lines of our hands**.
- I am going to be the **servant of your feet**
- My **kismet has waked up** at last.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Khushwant Singh's numerous experiments with the English language have subverted the linguistic paradigms and created an all-new dimension for the Indian English Writers. Along with the content and its marvelous treatment, these linguistic experiments have enabled Khushwant Singh to capture the chief position among the modern Indian writers. His linguistic experiments in 'A Train to Pakistan' and his collections of Short Stories have attracted readers and reviewers all over the world, and have placed Indian English fiction on a sound footing in the present-day highly competitive literary scene.

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